WERE PRIESTS COMMUNAL LEADERS IN LATE ANTIQUE PALESTINE? THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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The priests ran the Temple and its sacrificial cult according to divine law, and they were also politically influential in Jerusalem during the Second Temple period. Archaeological excavations in the city have uncovered their luxurious homes, with ritual baths and household vessels that demonstrate the priests’ punctiliousness in maintaining ritual purity. ¹ After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the sacrificial cult was terminated, and the priesthood, especially the high priests, lost their religious and political power in Jewish society. Despite their bereft status in the new configuration of post-Destruction society, however, the priests did not entirely disappear.² They were given special roles in the synagogue service, and we know of several priests who were also rabbis. Theoretically, it is possible to connect the ritual baths or stone vessels found at various sites in the Galilee with priests who resided in those locales after 70 CE. However, we also know that, in the


post-Temple era, the maintenance of a certain level of religious purity was observed by other segments of society, as well as the priests.\(^3\)

Thus, notwithstanding this evidence, it is still quite conceivable that the priests had been pushed aside and now played only minor roles, if any, in the life of the Jewish community.\(^4\)

The status of the priests in Jewish society of fifth- and sixth-century CE Palestine has been a recent subject of discussion in modern research. It is assumed that the priestly class paved its way to communal leadership in the Galilee following the void created by the disappearance of the pedigreed cadre of the Patriarchate and the waning of the intellectual elite known as the rabbinic class. At approximately the same time, the focus of religious life shifted from the \textit{bet midrash} to the synagogue, from a framework of pure study to one of engagement in synagogue liturgy.\(^5\) The reference in several letters of the church fathers to priests who represented the community; an allusion to priests in imperial legislation; the forging of the tradition of the twenty-four priestly courses that resided in the towns of the Galilee; the intensive preoccupation with the Temple and its cult on the part of liturgical poets, or \textit{paytanim},\(^6\) some of whom hailed from priestly


\(^6\) J. Yahalom, Poetry and Society in Jewish Galilee of Late Antiquity (Tel-Aviv, 1999), 107–16 (in Hebrew). According to M.D. Swartz, the poet, who composes \textit{piyyutim} to commemorate the Temple and the sacrificial cult for the realm of the synagogue,